

It's all Greek at weekend festival

Bring your appetite and enjoy St. Spyridon food that's weeks in the making

By Nicole Sours Larson, Special to the U-T 2 p.m. June 2, 2015



Angeliki Smirniotis, 77, and her husband, Dimitri Smirniotis, 80, were among volunteers preparing countless dolmades for the church festival. — *Misael Virgen*

Two hundred pounds of ground beef. One hundred twenty pounds of Greek macaroni. Eighty pounds of onions. Four gallons of tomatoes. Twenty-five gallons of béchamel sauce.

The quantities may seem mind-boggling to a home cook, yet these are just the basics used by the 20 to 30 volunteer cooks of St. Spyridon Greek Orthodox Church in assembling 60 large pans of pastitsio. They prepare this traditional macaroni-based dish each year for the Greek Festival celebrating the best in Hellenic hospitality and culture. This year's festival runs from Friday through Sunday at the church, located near Balboa Park at 3655 Park Blvd.

For about six to eight weeks before the annual event, now in its 46th year, the volunteers work three or four days a week in the immaculate, professional-quality church kitchen, coordinated by Julie Karagianides, to produce much of the festival fare.

The crew prepares and freezes 60 pans each of pastitsio and moussaka, the latter using eggplant and potatoes layered with a ground beef mixture, plus thousands of dolmades — grape leaves stuffed with meat and rice — later served topped with avgolemono sauce, made with eggs and lemon juice.

The authentic Greek pastries, requiring hundreds of pounds of phyllo leaves and butter — only the best butter, the cooks emphasize — they leave for last, to avoid having to freeze them. They've learned to prepare generous quantities because many regular festivalgoers show up early, equipped with large Tupperware containers to fill with their favorite pastries and stock their home freezers.

Drawing about 15,000 to 20,000 attendees annually, the festival is renowned for the quality and variety of its Greek food and beverages, as well as its music, folk dancing and other cultural and children's activities.

While the pastitsio, moussaka and other foods are defrosted and baked during the festival, many other foods, such as the marinated chicken, barbecued lamb, gyros, souvlaki and sausages, are cooked fresh on massive grills.

"The recipes we are using are originals, collected from Greece, many used since the first festival," explained Karagianides. "We buy only the best ingredients — we don't cut corners. You can eat baklava anywhere, but not the baklava you'll have here."

Home versions of many of the recipes appear in the church's cookbook, "Lemons, Loaves & Honey," collected by the Ladies Philoptochos Society, Anthousa Chapter — their women's philanthropic organization.

Specialty products, such as the Greek macaroni used for pastitsio and grape leaves used for dolmades, are available in internationally stocked stores such as Vine Ripe in La Mesa and North Park Produce.

Over the years, they've "lightened up" the older versions for health reasons, Karagianides said, choosing, for example, to grill rather than fry the eggplant slices for the moussaka, so they absorb less oil.

Church members, many Greek-born, contributed their family recipes for both the festival and the cookbook, with festival recipes adjusted only for quantity.

Like many church volunteers Karagianides, a native of Larissa in the Thessaly region of Greece, immigrated to the U.S. when she married a fellow Greek living there. While she learned how to bake pastries from her mother, she learned more about Greek cooking from the church ladies, especially about volume cooking for the festival, as did Eleni Merziotis, originally from Livadia.

More men, including Athens-born Vlasi Kouris, a parish council vice president, are venturing into the kitchen to cook, while council president Spero Tzathas handles all the food orders. Church member Pashalis Koutzimbis, owner of Orba's Greek Buffet in Chula Vista, often lends his expertise in quantity cooking, especially for the large vats of béchamel.

"Until 10 years ago, the women did all the cooking. Then we brought in our husbands to help, and then we asked the men from the parish council to help," said Vicky Mellos, originally from Tripolis.

With everyone eating more lightly these days, the dishes the volunteers produce for the festival are becoming increasingly "special occasion" fare, even for their families, Karagianides explained.

Yet the festival truly is a special occasion, the opportunity to experience philoxenia — traditional Greek hospitality.

Be sure to arrive hungry.

Meat Stuffed Dolmades with Avgolemono Sauce

Makes 8 to 10 servings

For dolmades

1 16-ounce jar grapevine leaves

2 pounds ground beef or 1 pound each ground beef and pork

1 cup yellow onions, grated

1 cup rice, uncooked

1 cup parsley, finely chopped

1 cup fresh dill, finely chopped or 2 tablespoons dried dill

Salt and pepper to taste

1/2 cup olive oil, plus extra for sprinkling on dolmades

1 cup boiling water

1/2 cup butter (optional)

For avgolemono sauce

3 eggs

2 lemons, juiced

1/2 cup water

1 cup liquid reserved from cooked dolmades

To make dolmades: Drain brine from grape leaves jar and rinse leaves well. Cut off any excess of vine from the leaves. In a mixing bowl, combine the meat, onion, rice, parsley, dill, seasonings and oil. Mix well. Put 1 tablespoon of meat and rice mixture in center of a grape leaf's ribbed side and roll leaf, folding edges over and rolling toward point of leaf. Dolmades may be frozen at this point.

Cover bottom of a deep sauce pan with some of the grape leaves. Arrange rolled dolmades in layers, packing them tightly, seam side down. Pour boiling water over the rolls, sprinkle with olive oil and dot with butter (optional). Place a heavy plate upside down over the rolls to keep them in place while cooking. Cover and simmer for 30 to 40 minutes, until the leaves are tender, the rice is cooked and the sauce reduced. Add more water if dish seems dry.

To make avgolemono sauce—in a mixing bowl, beat eggs until frothy. Gradually blend in lemon juice and water. Slowly add hot liquid from the dolmades, stirring constantly until mixture has thickened.

To serve, place dolmades in a serving dish and pour sauce over them.

Pastitsio Macaronia

The use of crushed garlic, cinnamon, nutmeg and allspice varies according to the cook. Add or eliminate them according to your preferences.

Makes 8 servings

Filling—

1 heaping tablespoon butter

2 pounds ground beef

1 small onion, finely chopped

1 clove crushed garlic, optional

1/8 to 1/4 teaspoon cinnamon, optional

1/8 to 1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg, optional

1 teaspoon salt

1/2 teaspoon pepper

1/2 teaspoon allspice, optional

1/2 cup parsley, finely chopped, or more to taste

1/2 cup white wine

2 to 3 medium-size tomatoes, peeled and crushed, or 1 pound canned tomatoes

2 egg whites

Also—

1 recipe 4 cups béchamel sauce [recipe follows]

1 pound long Greek macaroni for pastitsio [or other pasta]

2 heaping tablespoons butter

1 cup or more Parmesan or other grated cheese, or more to taste

To make filling—Heat 1 tablespoon butter in a large frying pan. Sauté the ground beef and onions until slightly browned. Drain meat. Add remaining ingredients, except for egg whites. Cover and cook over medium heat. When juice is mostly absorbed, remove from heat and let cool. Add egg whites and set aside.

Prepare béchamel sauce [recipe follows]

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Cook the macaroni according to package directions in salted, boiling water until soft but firm. Drain and return to the pan. Add 2 heaping tablespoons butter. Grease a 10-by-14-by-2-inch baking pan and add half the macaroni. Sprinkle with some of the grated cheese and cover with the meat filling. Top with the remaining macaroni. Sprinkle with more grated cheese and cover with the béchamel sauce. Sprinkle top with remaining cheese. Bake at 350 degrees for about 45 minutes or until golden brown. Let sit for 20 minutes before cutting into squares and serving.

Béchamel Sauce

Makes about 4-5 cups

1/2 cup butter

cup flour

4 cups hot milk

Salt and pepper to taste

Nutmeg, grated, to taste start with 1/8 to teaspoon

1 cup grated Parmesan or other cheese

2 eggs plus 2 yolks

Melt cup butter in a heavy saucepan. Add the flour and cook, whisking constantly for one minute. Add the hot milk and whisk until the sauce is smooth. Add salt, pepper and nutmeg. Remove from heat and stir in 1 cup cheese, eggs and egg yolks.

Moussaka

Makes 6 to 8 servings

5 round eggplants

Coarse or kosher salt for eggplant

3 potatoes

1/3 cup olive oil, plus more to brush on eggplant

1 large onion, grated

2 cloves garlic, sliced

1 pounds ground beef

3 cups fresh or canned tomatoes, puréed

cup white wine, optional

Salt and pepper to taste

2 egg whites

cup finely chopped parsley

6 tablespoons fine bread crumbs, divided

1 cups Kefalotiri, Pecorino or RomanoParmesan cheese, grated

4 cups recipebéchamel sauce see accompanying recipe

cup heavy cream

4 egg yolks, lightly beaten

Wash and trim eggplant. Slice into -inch-thick rounds. Sprinkle generously with coarse salt and leave them to drain in a colander for two hours. Rinse, squeeze gently and pat dry. Brush with olive oil and bake in 400-degree oven until brown but not mushy.

Peel and slice potatoes inch thick. Heat the olive oil in a heavy-bottomed saucepan and fry potatoes lightly until brown but not mushy. Remove potatoes and set aside. n same pan, sauté the onion and garlic until transparent. Add the meat and stir for 10 minutes until it begins to brown. Add the tomatoes and wine and season to taste. Simmer, covered, until all the liquid evaporates. Allow to cool and mix in the lightly beaten egg whites and the parsley.

Sprinkle the bottom of a 12-by-14-by-2-inch buttered ovenproof dish with 2 tablespoons of the bread crumbs. Arrange all the potato slices in a layer on the bottom. Then place a layer of eggplant, then spread half the meat sauce over the eggplant. Sprinkle with half the cheese and 2 more tablespoons of bread crumbs. Repeat with another layer of eggplant then the remaining meat sauce, then the rest of the cheese and bread crumbs. Cover with the remaining eggplant slices. Dish may be frozen at this point, covered tightly with plastic wrap.

When ready to bake thawing first if frozen prepare the béchamel and stir in the cream and egg yolks. Preheat oven to 400

degrees. Pour sauce over the moussaka and bake for about 45 minutes until nicely browned. Let sit for 15 minutes before serving.

Recipes adapted from "Lemons, Loaves & Honey," favorite recipes from Saint Spyridon Greek Orthodox Church Ladies Philoptocos Society, Anthousa

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